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Letter from Taizé

Preparing for the world-wide Council of Youth

PONTIFICIUM CONSILIUM PRO LAICIS 1967

February 1974

On the evening of Easter Day, we shall be entering the final stage of the preparation for the Council of Youth.

The Council will open on August the 30th. This will be the beginning of several years during which we shall be led in directions we cannot yet imagine.

To prepare ourselves to become men and women of communion, could this prayer become ours ?

"O Christ, so great is your attachment to man that wherever men are, even unknown to us, you are there, present.

For you, each human being is sacred. We do not belong to ourselves, and no-one belongs to us. We are yours, as you are God's.

When we are confined in our own prisons, your gift to us is to overcome barriers to discover a communion with you. When conflicts and divisions separate people, you call us to be tireless seekers after communion with all men."

Roger, your brother

In many, and very varied situations, in different countries, there are young people searching how to commit themselves more and more daringly in diverse ways of struggle and contemplation, so as to become people of communion.

Latin-America

Antonio writes about how he sees one of the roles that the Council of Youth might be able to play :

All over Latin-America there are movements and youth-groups, either political or religious, sometimes the two together, but only a limited number of them manages to live a commitment that is strong, truly radical. They are a minority. But their role is vital, as a stimulus for the majority : those who are not indifferent, but who often tend towards mediocrity or easy solutions (for instance, a false spiritualism). Perhaps it might be worth-while to try and push these people to go further, hoping that a lot might then wake up and, in various ways, join the 'minorities'.

Could the Council of Youth be somehow thought of as a means of communication and liason between the two groups ? If it could awaken in those who are too 'pietistic' a clearer awareness of the political dimension inherent in 'charity' ? And if it could nourish from the heart those people who already live entirely consecrated to the struggle for greater justice ?

Finland

Our festival, here in Finland, is probably best seen as Midwinter's-day. There is certainly a lot of ice. People who come from outside are struck by the stability of Church institutions ; and thinking together in small groups,

we have also come up with the question as to whether there is not a particularly Finnish temptation : all the time to be comparing ourselves one with another, competing and trying to beat the rest...

Aaro said one day "My first steps towards the Council of Youth have been very simple ones. Just leaving my life open to all the possibilities like an unfinished pattern... beginning to search... being open like that has given my studies a new boost ; because I am not too sure about the exact goal I am even more stimulated in the service I hope to be able to exercise in the Church."

Maria-Leena is a young house-wife living in southern Sweden with her family ; her little girl cannot speak ; they are immigrant workers. Her husband is a master-carpenter, but at the moment he is obliged to work in a factory. She told me *"My two children, and I — that is my 'cell'. Perhaps I shall be able to find other Finnish mothers with handicapped children. My husband ? He says that he cannot believe in God... That he could only believe with his hands. Lord, give him back his hands, give him work that machines are incapable of..."*

Her words have gone to other young people in Finland : others who are also voice-less. For example, young people studying in the remote corners of East Finland. They find in them a springing source to draw on, whilst they remain full of attention, ready to act as spokesmen for others from their region who are even more silent than they.

Anna - Maija

Italy

Luigi is a worker in Northern Italy, and an active trade-unionist :

I feel that I am in a desert situation, which makes it very hard for me to find any logical way of telling just

what I am living. Such is the state of things for workers in general today : the system offered is one impossible to break, the producer - consumer cycle.

Whatever time remains after work and travelling to and from work (which take up 10 or 12 hours in a day) is time to consume in : television, the press, sport... a confusion that is in actual fact very well organised.

The time free to study the system in is just enough for you to get angry and begin to protest, but never enough for you to find real alternatives. Such time is for "action-consuming" — all our gestures or even our words are in fact just so many consumer activities. When it comes down to it, everything is still alienating.

So the question is really this : what are the gestures and the words — the means of expression — that will let us break the cycle and create "actions that get somewhere" ?

At present experience tends to show that peoples' schools and action on a cultural level are constructive because of the opportunities they offer for real thinking.

No point in listing all the difficulties : evening activities often given up because of exhaustion after a full day's work, or because people want to see a film. And it is no different in the factory itself : a whole day's, a whole week's talking looses all its usefulness with some tiny promise from the boss, or because of a trifling misunderstanding amongst the workers...

You feel like little ants trying to fell a giant oak-tree. But I do not despair. I feel very strongly that I am not alone, that I am not an isolated case.

By now most people know that the system takes no notice of them and exploits them. But they lack something. Hope. And today hope cannot be a matter of thinking that something is bound to change. Today, hope has to be the conviction that tomorrow will be changed, that the world

will be built up and governed by the poor. In a sense such a hope does exist, you can see it in the harsh, painful struggle that the workers are ready to undertake. But it lacks the conviction that victory is certain. How can that conviction be given ? Always the same question : what is there to do ?

For the past few days, in my part of the works, we have been involved in industrial action : we hold many meetings and at each of them something happens that makes my skin creep : a good number of the workers, especially younger ones, always sit near me ; they look at me and say nothing ; they wait for me to speak up, and say clearly things that they feel in a confused way but that they only manage to express when I talk with them in private, one at a time.

But it is not enough just to speak. They want a response to their longing, gestures and words showing that you understand them, accept their deep desire : ways of finding instants of unity all together ; that is what they do not say, but hint at.

Often no response seems to come. And the next time it is the same thing. Perhaps we shall manage "actions that get somewhere" that will give rise to actions for the rest. But I wonder if that will ever happen, because it has failed to materialise so many times.

In all this I discover that actions that were valid once are not necessarily always valid. That unity and dialogue have a thousand faces. That the only really constant things are enthusiasm and exhaustion. Often I do not even get proper sleep.

And where is the dimension of belief ? Am I in the true desert, or just standing with my eyes shut in a complete confusion ? Should I think of my silence as a form of prayer ? I have no replies to these questions ; I am trying to understand.

New York

I have just been with a group of young Americans in New York. What struck me was how the Council of Youth is for each of them more and more an adventure that takes hold of them completely, calling each to a total commitment of their whole person.

The main questions were : how to go further than purely individual actions, so as to commit ourselves to one another ; how to take charge of one another's concerns ? And also : how to break down all the isolation that exists, and create places of real sharing and listening ?

Given the kind of thinking that there is in American society, where you feel overwhelmed and powerless because the whole thing is just so infinitely complex and ever-changing, we felt it was really important to overcome this state of despair in which no enthusiasm ever lasts long : for there to be groups and places that keep going for a good length of time, to help others gain new impetus in their turn. That means groups solid enough in their composition for a mutual commitment over a certain duration to be possible. Another necessity seemed to us to be the need for praying communities — people gathering regularly for that.

Basically, it comes down to inventing simple things, with the vital qualities of continuity and duration. There is a little community of three boys in New York now, perhaps it will grow ; and around them there is springing up a kind of network of sharing and praying.

We have to stay together, support one another, and realise that since we are searching together, that makes us responsible for one another.

Daniel, from Quebec

Indonesia

Today I saw a child : it might have been nine years old only, still to young to know despair. And yet, I cannot forget the gaze in its eyes — so hopeless — being without food, a shelter for the rain, a future to dream of... And I know he speaks the silent language of the many...

He communicates the reality which millions of people in this country face. Will those who dream of a country where prosperity and justice reign, have a message and give hope to those who have given up their dreams in the daily struggle for bare existence ? Will the young generation be able to let hope shine in the eyes of the too many who are too young to be in despair and yet are hopeless ?

Could it be confirmed by young people from other countries, that the young Indonesians are not alone in their struggle ? Could it be that the real communion with and in the Risen Christ will break through the barriers of religion, classes, cultures ?

Will it really happen that some among the young people in our country will see deeper than before, hear deeper than before how He continually invites for a communion in the deepest cries of all those who long for Life ?

I can see that something great is going to happen, a new seed is going to take root, in the Churches in this country, and through them reaching out to the many though words cannot express what this could be... 'God's plan, which will be complete when the time is right to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth with Christ as head.'

Belgium

From a social animator of a zone in Brussels :

In our sector of Brussels, about three thousand people (90 % of them foreign workers or old people) are going to be obliged to find somewhere else to live because they are soon to be evicted from their present homes. On the site, private promoters are going to build high-rise office blocks.

Our work, as animators, is mainly one of information : telling people about their rights as tenants, and the grants that they are entitled to. Telling them, too, how to react when there is police intimidation. Going along with them to help them find somewhere else to live more easily, especially when they have a large family. Organising meetings for those down to receive the social-authority housing now being built, so that they can begin to know each other better and create a relationship-pattern. To assemble people into a 'pressure group', and oblige the authorities to pay attention to the social problems of those expelled — not just to the speculators. The people give us the ideas ; our first role is to be catalysts and then, if they agree, we take certain initiatives for them because they are too afraid of being made to leave the country to act for themselves.

On the other hand, we have to be careful not to hurt the people who have been working in the district for years, but in another perspective : One group of christians had been doing 'charity', and could not accept our socio-political activities (designed to get to the roots of the social dramas resulting from the eviction orders). We would not like to loose contact with them, would rather see them evolve in their own way. For the moment, the only thing is to be interested in what they are doing and to explain why we are acting differently, more in a political dimension.

Struggle and contemplation to become people of communion. Our struggle for greater justice here, an action constantly nourished by encounters with people and also by depth of life in prayer, so as to remain serene. Prayer, so as always to have the eyes of Christ to see things with, to struggle on, as people of communion.

From an Islamic country

Eight of us have just met to break the fast of Râmadan together, to try and share what we are searching for. We have already found how difficult it is to do something social or political — here all "mixed" (christian-moslem) meetings are frowned on by the government, afraid of religious conversion or political propaganda.

So the main thing for us is a change in our own way of living. We are going to try to create something in terms of welcoming others : more a matter of listening than of hospitality in the normal sense. But before anything else, we must get to know one other better, because without trust between us nothing can be positive.

For dialogue to be possible each one has to be careful to recognise the other as he is and wants to be ; and you have also to know the other person well enough to sense what are the first elements of your vision of things and your faith to present to him.

The best criterion of mutual understanding is for the moslem to recognise himself in the christian's vision of Islam, and the christian to recognise himself in the moslem's vision of Christianity.

Anne

United States

Stany, from India, describes his visit to Harlem :

There is a group of young people, Blacks of course, who are very seriously studying how they can work for the liberation of their people. Hence they are studying their own history to understand why they are in this present situation. The whole encounter with them was very exciting and gave me a lot of hope. I spoke about the Council of Youth and I also added that what they were doing was part of the Council of Youth, as they were seeking ways in which to live out the joyful news.

I had a letter from one them a few days back, in which he says — *"Your visit gave us a lot of hope, man. There are times when I don't see nothing for the future of my people. But now I know that way out in India, (I checked it out on the map) there's you involved same as we. And also thousands of young people all over the world is doing the same kinda thinking as we. So we ain't alone here in Harlem, and Harlem ain't the only place with the problems. Suddenly I kinda feel a unity, man and a strength, see what I mean ? All what you said, about prayer and reflection and contemplation makes a lot of sense. We plan to do that in our group we never done it before. But now we see its what gives the struggle meaning and hope."*

Africa

Back home after much travelling in Europe, Dieudonné has returned to his work :

In Africa, economic oppression is practised day and night against our people. God gave us enough wealth for us to live and feed our offspring. But today we die of hunger, whilst Europe comes to "multiply the loaves" for us and distribute charity out of pity. Why ? Because Europe exploits us.

On one of the journeys I made in France, during a meeting with french industrial workers we discussed international solidarity.

One point that came up was the arms trade. If France sells armaments, it is never to North America, Germany or England, it is to the so-called under-developed countries. Could the workers and technicians who are christians say : "We refuse to manufacture weapons ; what we want to make are machines that will make it possible for the african worker or peasant, instead of using just a chopper, to buy a cheap machine to cultivate his plantation" ?

Mexico

In mid-November over eight hundred young people gathered in Mexico to pool their experiences around the theme of this year : "Struggle and contemplation to become men and women of communion". Meetings of this kind are planned for Brazil in January, Argentina in February, Colombia in March, Paraguay in April, in Mexico again in May and in Peru during the month of June.

Santa Cecilia is a poor district of Guadalajara (Mexico), with about 30,000 inhabitants. In this marginalised district there are over 50 grass-roots communities. It is their existence which gives a collective life to the district ; otherwise it would be a mere juxtaposition of new-comers — most of the people there have come in off the land.

These grass-roots communities hosted the young attending the meeting, so that there could be a real reciprocity between the young people and the poor who welcomed them. One evening there were group meetings with the animators of the grass-roots communities of Santa Cecilia. These animators are ordinary inhabitants and no doubt a good number of them can neither read nor write. This direct contact with them is so far beyond all the things that you could ever say about "the people". On the following day all the participants in the meeting were invited to visit the inhabitants in their homes, two or three together.

There were young people of every sort — indian peasants, others born in the big cities, young "politically" committed (in the broad sense of the term) and others very spiritually orientated, some already familiar with the preparation of the Council of Youth, others not really quite sure why they were there. A few of these 820 young people had come from other Latin-American countries, from Canada or from the United States. "In our group, the first day we saw that between the mexicans who are peasants and those who are students the difference is as great as between mexicans and europeans. But with what we were able to live in community together, that difference was not something dividing us : rather, it was seen as an obstacle made to be overcome."

Three days after the end of the meeting, seven of those who had taken part in it held a meeting with some forty youths living near them to tell what they had experienced. They were peasants, very poor, who speak machagua (an indian language). What they said is very significant and probably the most beautiful thing that you could wish to hear about the meeting : "You had there graduates, students, priests, americans, canadians... but nobody made any distinction. Everyone slept on the ground, everyone was able to speak, and there were none of the usual differences." *Said by young indians to other young indians, that is very precious. For in Mexico, as elsewhere, the indian is treated as somebody inferior — doubly so if he is a poor peasant. And even in Latin-America, it is certain that this equality was only possible because of the extreme simplicity of the conditions under which the meeting was held (essentially, of course, a simplicity of spirit, but without the poverty of the location that spirit would never have had a chance of showing through).*

It seems as though the meeting was in itself a kind of sign : young people of varying backgrounds being made welcome by the grass-roots communities of a very poor district.

South Africa

A young American just back from six months in South Africa :

The people here are as diverse and beautiful as the country — towering mountain ranges of the Drakensberg, flat plains of the karoo bright with the desert flowers of springtime, the lush growth of sugar-cane, pineapples, mangoe-trees ; sixteen million Africans from 10 major tribes, four million whites, two million coloured and nearly one million Asians : richly different worlds which never meet.

Here, in a country where peoples' lives are structured in such a way that strangers seldom meet, how can people begin to discover one another as people ? A mother of five said to me one night *"I know it's love that changes things ; but how do you love someone who is a stranger ?"* Few care about the hardships of others — or appreciate their talents — for they simply do not move in the same world. Lack of contact also breeds fear of the unknown.

The blacks, who suffer daily hardship and indignities, fear for survival physically and in spirit. The whites, too, live in fear. Those who struggle for change must fear the loss of their freedom. They are watched : their phones may be tapped, their mail read, their passports removed. Whoever questions, and works for change may be 'banned' ; in this there is no discrimination by color. To be 'banned' is to become silent and invisible. You may not publish or be quoted, may not attend gatherings of 2 or more persons, may not travel outside a prescribed distance from your home... This, without trial or proof of guilt ; a 'sentence' lasting for five years and renewable.

Discouragement amongst those who struggle is a continual problem. Even where there are signs of hope, they must remain quite hidden, often unknown by the others who must also struggle on alone. They wonder *"Does anyone remember us ? — Is the world aware of what we are living ?"*

But life pulses after life, and the sun still shines. There are those who continue year after year in pursuit of change. And it comes. Some Churches begin to question the role of christians in such a society ; they examine their own distribution of power and wealth. Some try to open the door of their church to all, together. Some families invite for a meal in their home a family of another colour. Some try to live in small groups. Will the changes come soon enough and be vast enough to avert change of a violent kind ? It is a question which hangs everywhere in the air — unasked, unanswered.

It is as though the Joyful News were written for South Africa. Quietly it is lived already by some, even more quietly, shared. This is not the time for shouting, or for spectacular things. What is, needs to be deep to live. A way must be found to crack the shackles of fear, to allow the life that pulses beneath the surface to grow. We have to make room for dreams to dance in, so that stories which sing may once again flow from the lips of the people who are Africa.

Chili

A peasant from one of the poorest parts of Chili was able to get the following letter through to us in December, a letter written from his prison cell :

The man writing to you is a "prisoner of war". Not that I have ever participated in any war, but that is how the military authorities call those of us who are in prison in Chili for having been members of the People's Unity.

I could tell you so many things, but it is not possible without compromising others. All I ask is that you pray God for our families. They are suffering so much. Some have nothing to eat because our salaries are lacking. After all, you could say that we here in prison are better off than those outside — they are all the time being harassed by the police. Their nerves are stretched to breaking point because they are told all kinds of things about us : for instance, that we have been shot, or things much worse.

God alone can read in our hearts. He knows that we never at any moment sought to harm others, even if we sometimes made mistakes like any human being. We struggled for the general good, especially of those most in need.

May the Lord keep you from having to go through what has hapened to us. I greet you in the name of all my fellows and thank you for your prayers. May God bless you.

International Meetings at Taizé

Dates : From February 4 ; each week, from Monday evening to Sunday afternoon.

For those aged 15 - 17 : two possibilities :
February 9 - 10 ; — March 30 - April 2.

Silent retreat : young people are welcome at any date to come and spend a few days at Taizé in silence and solitude.

Ages : between 18 and 29.

Accommodation : in personal tents or in collective tents. Please bring blankets, sleeping-bags, and air-mattresses. Bring your own tent if possible. Certain places are set aside for silence, for those who wish.

Cost : Materially, the whole preparation of the Council of Youth is entirely self-funding. Since the rates of exchange are so unequal, it is not possible to quote a single price for all. Each person contributes in accordance with his means, if possible between 9 and 15 french francs per day. (This includes all meals.)

Easter Meeting

from Friday evening April 12 (Good Friday prayers at 8.30 pm)
till Monday morning April 15.

We shall be entering the last months of preparation for the Council of Youth, which will open August 30.

MEETINGS in 1974

Name :

First Name :

Address :

(with zip-code and country)

Profession : ..... Age : .....

Will take part in the week from Monday ..... to Sunday ..... Yes-No

will come for Easter (Friday - Monday) Yes-No

Has already taken part in a meeting at Taizé : Yes-No

Is bringing own tent : Yes-No

Can be part of reflexion-groups in italian — german — french — english — spanish — portuguese — dutch.

Can undertake simultaneous translation from ..... into .....

Need .... more registration forms / Information material.

Registration to be sent to : MEETINGS, 71460 - Taizé-Community, France.
(It will be registered, you will not receive any acknowledgment.)

Please remember to write announcing your arrival! Then the work of welcoming and feeding you is much easier...

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